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Jim Fitzpatrick MP
Minister of State
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
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Dear Jim Fitzpatrick MP

Beak trimming of laying hens

I am writing to urge Defra not to dilute or postpone the ban on the beak trimming of laying hens which is due to come into force on 1st January 2011. It would be a highly retrograde step to weaken or delay this important welfare reform.

I would be grateful if I could have a meeting with you to discuss our concerns.

The ban was originally enacted in 2002 and was repeated in the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007. Similar legislation has been enacted in the other parts of the UK.

We hope that you will not accept the recommendation of the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) that the ban should be postponed for a lengthy period. It is particularly disappointing that FAWC has recommended that further legislative action be delayed until 2015, and has gone so far as to suggest that this should be the date at which the legislation is reviewed and a revised implementation date set. This would represent a lengthy and an undefined postponement, which would help neither the farming community nor farm animal welfare.

A postponement is in our view unnecessary. The scientific literature shows that the correct way to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism is not to beak trim the birds, but to keep them in good conditions – in particular to provide opportunities for them to forage, ground-peck and dustbathe - and to select for birds that are less prone to feather pecking and cannibalism.

A postponement is also unjustified. When the ban was enacted in 2002, the industry was given a generous phase out period of eight years. I am a member of the Beak Trimming Working Group established by Defra to help pave the way for the coming into force of the ban in 2011. I am aware from my time on the Working Group that the industry has primarily used the phase out period to press for the ban to be dropped rather than using these eight years to constructively prepare for keeping hens without beak trimming.

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Farmers who have left it until a late stage to prepare for the ban should not be rewarded for their delay by being granted a postponement of the ban. Such an approach would undermine the credibility of UK legislation and encourage producers in other sectors to seek postponement of legislation by failing to make required changes in a timely manner.

Some are arguing that the use of infra-red beak trimming should be permitted as recent research commissioned by Defra concluded that their results do not demonstrate evidence of chronic pain. However, the researchers point out that their study was not able to determine whether infra-red trimming causes pain in the first 10 weeks of life. Indeed, they referred to another study that provides some behavioural evidence of short term pain (longer time taken to approach feed and initiate feeding, less beak related behaviours and lower feed intake for up to 9 weeks) after infra-red trimming. Another study concluded that beak trimming results in acute pain whether it is performed with the hot-blade or infra-red procedures (Kuenzel, 2007).

In addition, we agree with FAWC that infra-red trimming causes concerns because of trauma to the bird during the procedure; loss of integrity of a living animal by the removal of part of its beak; and loss of a sensory tool. The beak is a key sensory organ for hens.

When Defra banned beak trimming in 2002 they accepted the argument that the correct way to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism is not to beak trim the birds, but to keep them in good conditions and to select for birds that are less prone to feather pecking and cannibalism. We urge Defra to adhere to this thinking and to maintain the 2011 commencement date for the ban on beak trimming

We hope that a government that accords a high priority to animal welfare will not now reverse one of its key welfare achievements.

Yours sincerely



Peter Stevenson
Chief Policy Advisor